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# THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

## LIFE BEYOND THE GRAVE<sup>1</sup>

J. M. POWIS SMITH

The problems of death and its consequences have compelled man's interest from the earliest times even unto the recent meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. The volume before us is the first of a series to be devoted to the consideration of the views of mankind as it has moved onward and upward in the scale of civilization. The aim and method of the author are purely historical. He is satisfied to state what has been thought and to leave the task of determining the validity of the various hypotheses to his readers. The aborigines of Australia and the outlying islands are selected for the beginning of the work because they represent the lowest stage of civilization from which we have any adequate records. Civilization and religion go hand in hand. The most primitive types of religion go along with the most primitive types of culture. The savagery amid which we move in these lectures is not a perversion or degeneration of a higher and earlier culture, but rather, as Frazer points out, an arrested development. The ideas and practices here found are only such as have in part, not altogether, been left behind by advancing civilization. Some of these primitive conceptions are still with us and retain much of their vitality.

The belief in the persistence of the personality beyond the grave is universal among the tribes dealt with by Frazer. Indeed, death is looked upon, by some at least, as wholly unnatural, being accounted for in general by some blunder in the trans-

mission of the divine will to men or in each specific case as due to the malignant act of some sorcerer. Man is naturally immortal. There is no such thing as a "natural death."

The prevailing attitude of the survivors toward the spirit of the departed is one of fear. The funeral practices therefore are largely such as are thought to contribute to the propitiation and pacification of the spirit of the deceased. Mutilations and penalties of the most grievous sort are endured for the purpose of demonstrating to the jealous ghost the sincerity of the mourners' grief. Gifts are showered upon the spirit in order to make him content with his present lot and keep him from returning after things he may want. Or a wholly different method is employed, viz., that of driving the spirit away by frightful noises and hostile demonstrations that he may fear to return. Or, devices are contrived to deceive the spirit, either by causing it to lose its way back to its old home, or by pretending to perform deeds or give gifts in accordance with the wish of the spirit which are done or given only in pantomime.

Points of contact with early Hebrew usage are not wanting. For example, the mourners cut themselves that their blood may feed the ghost and strengthen it. They tattoo themselves in honor of the dead. Insanity and prophecy are identical, as with the Hebrews, and are due to ghostly possession of the victim. Circumcision is commonly practiced and is always connected with the thought of death and the future life, being intended as worship or

<sup>1</sup> *The Belief in Immortality and the Worship of the Dead*. Vol. I: "The Belief among the Aborigines of Australia, The Torres Straits Islands, New Guinea and Melanesia." [The Gifford Lectures, St. Andrews, 1911-12.] By G. J. Frazer. London: Macmillan, 1913. Pp. xxii+495. 10s.

propitiation of the dead. It is sometimes performed upon a son in behalf of his sick father in the hope of staving off the approach of death.

Many interesting and curious practices are recorded. Among the Koita and Motu tribes admission into the realm of bliss is denied to any who have failed to have their noses pierced. Among the same peoples the belief seems to prevail that the tenure of a ghost's life depends upon the survivors—only so long as the names and memories survive among the living can the ghost live. When he is wholly forgotten he dies the second death. Effective use of this idea was made by Maeterlinck in *The Blue-Bird*. In some parts, a belief in the reincarnation of the departed spirit as a newly born babe

is entertained. Widows, whose husbands have been "good providers" and kind, frequently insist upon accompanying them to the land of no return in order that they may enjoy the same care and support there that they have experienced here.

The book is full of information and interest. One might even criticize it on this score, saying that there is no need of repeating illustrations indefinitely; enough is as good as a feast. But there is a certain value in the very abundance of the materials. There can be no question as to the legitimacy of general conclusions based upon so wide an induction. It is to be earnestly hoped that this indefatigable author may be enabled to complete the series upon which he has made so excellent a start.

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## BOOK NOTICES

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### **Social Environment and Moral Progress. By**

Alfred Russel Wallace. New York: Cassell & Co., 1913. Pp. vi+181. \$1.25.

This volume has been much reviewed and much misunderstood. The author makes extreme statements in a manner which repels many who pick up the book for cursory examination, and which therefore tends to hinder a careful and unprejudiced consideration of its claims. The following sentence, italicized by the author, illustrates our point: "Taking account of . . . undoubted facts, many of which are so gross, so terrible, that they cannot be overstated, it is not too much to say that our whole system of society is rotten from top to bottom, and the social environment as a whole, in relation to our possibilities and our claims, is the worst that the world has ever seen" (p. 169). The book contains a great deal of matter, both statistical and argumentative, which is being presented more tactfully and acceptably by other writers. If it were merely the reprinting of a series of campaign speeches, its form would be excusable; but the volume does not have that character. As a treatise, it bears the marks of hurried preparation; and if it came from the pen of an unknown writer, instead of from the distinguished hand of Darwin's evolutionary co-discoverer and colleague, it would

hardly have commanded the attention it has received.

Careful study of the book shows that Mr. Wallace has really done himself injustice through excess of zeal. He admits that up to the end of the eighteenth century, modern civilization was very crude and stationary, and that the sudden application of labor-saving machinery in the nineteenth century put too great a stress upon society (pp. 49, 50.) Such being the case, the social evils of the nineteenth century (many of which persist until now) could hardly have been avoided. A hundred years or so is a short span in the life-history of the human race. Moreover, the author concedes that much progress has been made toward the realization of social wrongs to such an extent that "the omens for the future are good" (p. 137). Elsewhere he writes, in a strain which would do credit to a Christian seer, "The divine nature in us—that portion of our higher nature which raises us above the brutes, and the influx of which makes us men—cannot be lost, cannot even be permanently deteriorated by conditions however adverse, by training however senseless and bad. It ever remains in us, the central and essential portion of our *human* nature, ready to respond to every favorable opportunity that arises, to grasp and hold firm every fragment of high thought or noble action that has been